

News when voters need it

2 TV stations and 2 newspapers began election reporting early. 4 others lagged.

By Michael Stoll

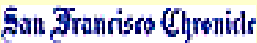





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Suppose you had to master a set of complex issues. Then make decisions that would affect your taxes, the condition of neighborhood schools, how California should climb out of debt and who your political leaders will be.

Would you wait until the last minute to prepare for this civics exam on a ballot, or give yourself several weeks to mull it over?

At Grade the News, we wanted to know which among the eight most popular Bay Area print and broadcast news outlets began to excite and inform citizens about the election early, and which procrastinated.

Average daily campaign coverage before election, all types

News organization	3 weeks before	1 week before	
	$\frac{3}{4}$	$\frac{9}{10}$	fraction of a newspaper page per day
San Jose Mercury News	$\frac{2}{3}$	$\frac{9}{10}$	
<u>CONTRA COSTA TIMES</u>	$\frac{1}{3}$	$\frac{7}{10}$	
	4.2	5.6	minutes per day
	3.1	2.9	
	2.7*	.8*	
	2.4	1.8	
	4.1	4.5	

***All weekday newscasts were hour-long but KPIX's. Channel 5 airs only half-hour shows adjacent to prime time.**

Weekend newscasts were 30 minutes long. Newspaper totals are based on the total space consumed by campaign stories beginning on the front and local news front pages, including space inside when the story "jumps" from the display page. Fractions are based on the size of a typical page, 240 square inches.

As part of our [campaign coverage study](#), we found the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *San Jose Mercury News*, KTVU Channel 2 and particularly KNTV Channel 11 started early -- at least three weeks before Election Day. The *Contra Costa Times*, however, waited until closer to March 2 before ramping up.

Surprisingly, we found that KRON, KPIX and KGO, channels 4, 5 and 7, respectively, actually reported less about the assorted political campaigns in the week before Election Day than they had three weeks before. And their early reporting was already scant. KPIX's campaign coverage between the sampled weeks plummeted by 70%.

All this leaves the voters with little information on which to base their choices at the ballot box, experts say.

"People tend to start paying attention about a month out," said Lewis Friedland, a professor of communication at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. "The media ought to be doing serious and consistent coverage if they want to contribute to the public's understanding. One week out is enough to focus people's attention on a particular race, to boost turnout. But you can't really educate people at that point."

When the news media begin to cover the campaign early, not only does the public have more time to absorb and discuss the merits of candidates and ballot measures, but reporters also have more time to investigate candidates and ballot measures. This reduces the likelihood of last-minute airing of damaging claims, such as the Arnold Schwarzenegger groping allegations the *Los Angeles Times* broke five days before the Oct. 7 recall election. The trend toward more voters mailing in absentee ballots early also makes reporting in the weeks before an election more valuable.

Fair, original reporting the norm

The analysis also found that all Bay Area newsrooms treated the campaigns with an even hand. If one side of an issue was aired, the other side got a chance to respond -- if not in the same story, then in a related story.

We also looked at how much of the coverage was produced by local reporters -- and thus likely to be tailored to Bay Area concerns. Here there was more variation. Even though we capped the number of sources counted in newspaper stories to level the playing field between broadcast and print, only KTVU averaged three or more sources among broadcasters. The *Chronicle*, *Mercury News* and *Times* averaged four or more sources, and were much more likely to bring in experts to rise above "he said-she said" journalism.

Grade the News analyzed every story about the March 2 election that ran one week and three weeks before Election Day on five television stations and in three newspapers. We selected the most prominent news -- the most-watched evening newscast and print stories editors deemed important enough for the front or local news pages. To

compensate for the space advantage of print, researchers examined every TV story in the longest newscast between 6 and 11:30 p.m.

Bay Area newsrooms varied widely in their commitment to covering the run-up to the elections.

Even three weeks out from the election, the *Chronicle* and the *Mercury News* were running two-thirds of a display page or more per day of campaign stories. KTVU and KNTV each ran more than four minutes per night. For each of these newsrooms, that increased moderately in the campaign's final week.

KPIX went in the other direction. It devoted an average of 2.1 minutes to the presidential race each night on its most-watched newscast -- mostly "horserace" coverage of who's ahead rather than stories about candidates' positions. As John Kerry pulled far ahead during the week before the election, that dropped to 35 seconds a night. But all other campaign coverage produced by the station in that newscast -- about state propositions, local ballot measures and congressional, legislative and local candidates -- stayed at a nearly nonexistent level, going from 16 seconds a night to just 12 seconds a night. When the Democratic presidential primary horse race was over, so, pretty much, was KPIX's coverage.

***Times* waits until last minute**

The *Contra Costa Times* treated the campaign as a minor story as little as three weeks before the election, running a third of a page per day. The week before the election, the paper ran twice as much.

The inconsistency could have presented the voters in Contra Costa County with a problem. Managing Editor Chris Lopez said his proudest achievement during the last election cycle was getting his voter guide out before any other major paper -- the third Sunday before Election Day -- in order to help those who want to vote early by mail. "What we're trying to do is get it out as early as possible, to make it available to the community," Mr. Lopez said. But without much campaign reporting on front and local-front news pages three weeks before the vote, the 92,000 Contra Costa County voters who cast absentee ballots may not have been well served.

Early and consistent coverage inoculates against last-minute political attacks, either through ads, leaks or press conferences, when it may be impossible to undo misleading information propagated by political campaigns. And from a civic perspective, there's another reason why early coverage of an election would be advantageous: Including more campaign news, for longer periods, allows more total coverage, which performs an important civic education function.

Bay Area voters certainly had a lot to learn. Across the region there were 65 local ballot measures, four state propositions, a handful of legislators and hundreds of municipal, county and local party committee candidates.

Robert Entman, a political scientist at North Carolina State University who has written extensively on the role of the press in the democratic process, said political parties are necessary to excite broad public participation, but that doesn't exempt the press from its civic responsibility.

"Helping democracy ought to be their highest professional duty," Prof. Entman said. "They have ways to dramatize [politics] and make it interesting, but it's expensive. It's easier to draw an audience with car crashes."

Wide range in newsroom effort

The *Chronicle* provided the most original coverage -- 94% of campaign news was homegrown. In contrast, KGO imported most of its campaign news, generating just 42% of the campaign story time it aired during the sample period.

"Any news organization that relies heavily on its network feed," Mr. Friedland said, "is less likely to engage in in-depth reporting, and is less likely to connect national issues to the local situation, such as a plant closing in the area that might have some relation to the national debate about economics."

In terms of original coverage, the *Mercury News* followed the *Chronicle* at, 83%; the *Times* was 74% original. Television stations were less so: KPIX ran stories primarily gathered by its own staff 64% of the time; KNTV, 62%; KTVU, 57%; KRON, 57%.

Grade the News regularly gives letter grades based on a "local relevance" index. Based on this scale (and giving extra points for newscasts that are not adjacent to national news broadcasts) the *Chronicle*, the *Mercury News* and the *Times* would each get an A; KPIX, KNTV, KTVU and KRON would each get a B; and KGO would get a D.